



"Why Is a Raven Like a Writing-Desk?"

Anne Pruett-Barnett,
Senior Pastor/Transitional Interim

I am a great fan of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; for it is filled with all sorts of precious nuggets on which to reflect. In Chapter 7: A Mad Tea-Party, Hatter presents Alice with a riddle, asking: "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"

Now *before* you look to see what Lewis Carroll's character offers as the answer, consider what *your* answer is. *Why is a raven like a writing-desk?* If you are a child around the ages of six or seven, you would most likely be excited by this question and begin *immediately* to try and figure out the answer. At any other age, *unless* you are a person who has enjoyed riddles no matter what your age, you will shut down your imagination after one or two half-hearted tries. For it seems an impossible task to answer the riddle. Alice didn't fare much better. After some silly conversation by those at the table and Alice trying to remember all she could about ravens and writing-desks, the Hatter asks: "Have you guessed the riddle yet?" "No, I give it up," Alice replied, "what's the answer?" "I haven't the slightest idea," said the Hatter.

The future of The United Methodist Church(UMC) is a riddle which many within the denomination are trying to solve presently. For it is a riddle that affects *every* United Methodist around the world. The Traditional Plan and the plan for disaffiliating, passed at the 2019 special session of General Conference, the body in The UMC which sets the polity and direction for all the local churches such as St Marks, have drawn clear lines in the sand in terms of the inclusive nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. If you are unaware of these two plans, please take the time to go online and read them; for they affect St Marks future and the future of The UMC.

There are many in our denomination who want the church to be a place of *grace*, of love *without strings*, for *all*. They want *all* who enter the doors of a UM church to have the same disciplinary rights and privileges; they want no one denied access to *any* part of the church. When I was asked to come to

St Marks UMC, one of the draws for me was that it was a church with a vision statement that says: “*We believe everyone is a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.*” Mark and I can give testimony to the truth of how this church family seeks to live into this vision. We have seen it personally!

Now here’s the thing. We cannot hide our heads in the sand and hope that the problem will be resolved without our participating. That time is long gone. We can no longer sit back and hope someone else will take care of the matter. Presently, if you are in a United Methodist church, you, like Alice, are being asked “Have you guessed the riddle yet?” *And* the truth of the matter is, many, like Alice, still want someone to tell us the answer. Again, that time is long gone. If you do not engage, decisions will be made for St Marks and its members, without your input.

I am engaging because my Methodist (now United Methodist) roots run deep. I love the Wesleyan tradition of grace. I love the world-wide mission. I love the fact that the secular world has turned to us in the past to use our infrastructure to resolve a debilitating health issue such as malaria. I love that my local church has *not* had to look exactly like another local church while we all have remained under the same God revealed in Jesus Christ, powered by the Holy Spirit. I love that United Methodists put an emphasis on The Great Commandment to love God, neighbor, and self as a response to a question asked of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” I love that we are called to be followers of Jesus for the transformation of the world. I love that historically we have been able to live together even though we have not all viewed the Bible’s authority in the same way. I love the community which gathers around its vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. I love the freedom in The UMC to worship God in so many different ways. I love coming to the Lord’s table with those gathered. The list of why I am engaging is long.

The most important reason for me comes from our baptismal vows which I hold dearly. As we come into our UM version of Christ’s holy church, one of the promises we make is to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. I cannot do this if I do not engage in the conversation! in the process!

I mention our baptism vows because I want you to understand that my commitment is *not* a political or worldly one. It flows from my faith in Jesus

Christ and the promises made when I was initiated in the Church with a capital C through water and God's Spirit. It is from these baptismal vows that the following process, in which we have engaged and will be engaged, comes.

Process

Prior to 2019 special session General Conference (GC)

- Called the church to pray
- Attended Bishop's session pre-General Conference for clergy; invited laity to attend their session
- Invited Janet Harman to review legislation which was coming to GC
- Invited church to tune-in to live stream of GC

Following GC session

- Held prayer service in Chapel following GC session
- Attended Bishop's session for clergy; invited laity to attend their session and attended with them
- Joined UM colleague groups around the nation for conversation about next steps for UMC
- Posted (and continue to do so) FB articles with on-going conversation; try to post from varying perspectives
- Distributed the Bishop's letter
- Invited St Markers to our home to meet with pastors to discuss what had happened at GC and its impact on St Marks
- Met with individuals who did not make it to gatherings at our home to engage in conversation
- Talked with individuals who felt leaving The UMC was the only option

Now

- Attend annual conference where delegates for the 2020 GC will be chosen.
- Will inform you as to pertinent information that comes out of our annual conference and the annual conferences throughout the nation.
- To continue work to develop signage for St Marks that says we welcome all.
- Will continue to talk with individuals to assess their feelings and commitments.
- July meeting – to hear alternative plans from The Traditional Plan

and to talk about how St Marks can give its dollars to the general church. Time to be announced soon.

- Will continue to distribute alternatives to The Traditional Plan and lead the church to choose a direction, to join its voice with other UM churches.
- Will continue to work with Vision Team on future staffing.

All processes are refined as we step through them. Please know that as new information emerges, new plans emerge, I'll keep you informed to the best of my ability.